The Punch-marked Coins: A Survival of the Indus Civilization

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(With six text illustrations)

"PUNCH-MARKED coins are the earliest Indian archæological 'document' that exists," wrote Mr. E. H. C. Walsh in 1923 in a thorough study of these interesting remains of Indian proto-historic times.[1] At the time when he wrote his article, very little, if anything, was known of the freshly discovered prehistoric civilization in the Indus Valley, at Harappā and Mohenjo-daro. Even in a more recent publication, in Professor Chakrabortty's numismatic handbook,[2] no attempt is made to explain the symbols punched upon these primitive coins, and it still holds good what Mr. Walsh said in 1923: "Until our present sources of information are added to, the significance of the marks on punch-marked coins must remain the subject of speculation and surmise." The late Mr. W. Theobald's study is an excellent collection of materials, but his explanations might fitly be called "archaic".[3] Mr. D. R. Bhandarkar has given some very ingenious interpretations of a number of these *rūpas*.[4] But these interpretations concern only a very few of the large number of symbols.

The significance of these symbols, however, is of paramount importance. That they have some meaning, no one doubts It is obvious that a few of them are Solar, Lunar, and such-like symbols; but these are only a fraction of the great mass. It is not impossible that they hold the clue to early Indian

[1] "Indian Punch-marked Coins (a Public Coinage issued by Authority)," in *Centenary Supplement*, *JRAS.*, 1924, pp. 175–189.

[2] *A Study of Ancient Indian Numismatics*, etc., Calcutta, 1931.

[3] "Notes on some of the symbols found on the punch-marked coins of Hindustan," etc., in *JASB.*, lix, pt. i, Nos. iii–iv, 1890.

[4] *A. R. Arch. Survey*, 1913–14, pp. 210–13.

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history, and if one day scholars can " read " these signs, they will be able, probably, to reconstruct a period of Indian history of which we do not know anything at present. I am writing not to explain these symbols, but to show that the solution of this problem is closely connected with the deciphering of the Indus Valley script.

When going through the signs published in the plates of Cunningham, Theobald, and Walsh, I was immediately struck by certain animal representations. The most frequent ones are those of the humped Indian bull, the elephant, the tiger, the crocodile, and the hare. Now all these animals occur also on the seals of Mohenjo-daro and Harappā. Not only are the subjects similar, but there are similarities in such small details that one must necessarily suppose that they are not due to mere chance or to " similar working of the human mind ".

Here is, e.g., the surprising identity of subject and execution in Fig. 1 : a crocodile, holding a fish. The large open jaws show the teeth, and the fish is not shown between them, but in a somewhat peculiar way, " hanging " as it were just in front of the mouth. Not only is the subject similar, but both animals face right, and a number of small details agree perfectly.[1]

Both the humped and the non-humped bull are represented in Mohenjo-daro. The same is the case with the punch-marks. Fig. 2 shows a " European " bull before a " trough " facing right. The parallel from Mohenjo-daro also faces right, and has a trough in exactly the same position as its late descendant. The humped bull occurs in many varieties, and we reproduce here only one, in Fig. 3, with an equivalent from the Indus Valley opposite it. Elephants are represented in Fig. 5 ; they never occur with a trough on coins,

[1] It will be seen that in our drawings we have not tried to render all details of the Indus seals. We believe that this method offers a fair means of comparison. The size of these punches is far too small to allow any details and their drawing must necessarily be of a summary character.

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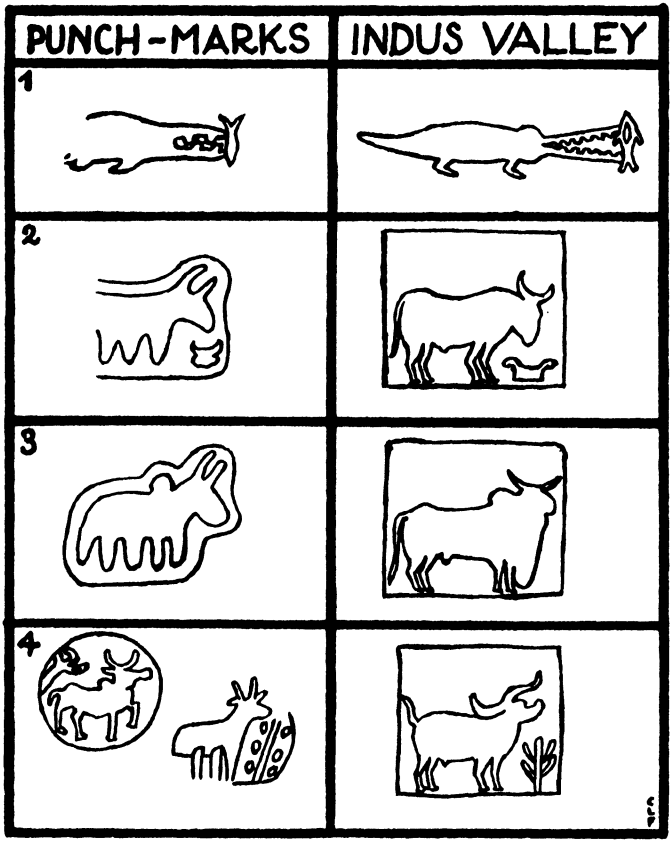
and in Mohenjo-daro, as far as I am aware of it, there is only one single seal where a trough is put before an elephant. Another remarkable agreement in detail.

In Fig. 4 another humped bull is standing before or next to a tree or plant; a well-known element in the prehistoric



civilizations of India and Mesopotamia. The two examples given will suffice to show that the old tradition was kept alive up to proto-historic times. Nor is the motif of the "Tiger and Sacred Tree" unknown on the punched coins: Fig. 6 presents what must be a tiger before a Sacred Tree in a railing. The parallel seal of Mohenjo-daro shows a tree, on a branch

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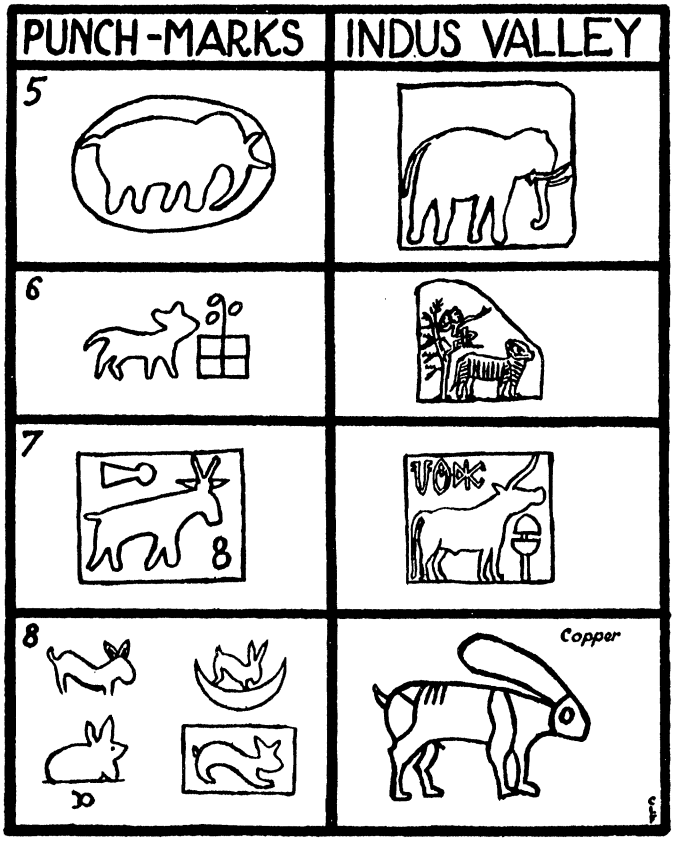
of which a figure is seen—probably the Tree Spirit. Last but not least, out of the many punch-marks that could be shown here, we reproduce in Fig. 7 one more bull on account of the surprising similarity of the general arrangement with that of the Indus seals : a bull facing right ; before him a trough,



consisting of an upper and a lower portion ; and, in the upper left corner, a " pictogram ", or, anyhow, all that is left of an old tradition ! All these are placed in a square area, and the whole must strike everyone as a survival of the old seals.

Less convincing will be the representation of the hare as seen in Fig. 8. No small details agree here, but the fact remains

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that the symbol of this animal appealed to the inhabitants of Mohenjo-daro as well as to those of proto-historic India. And if none of the above examples would carry persuasion if it stood alone, the sum total of the comparisons is certainly impressive.

There is, moreover, further evidence for a connection between the Indus Valley seals and the punch-marks on the coins. We are able to recognize a large number of Indus script pictograms among the punch-marks published by previous writers—too large a number, indeed, to ascribe it to mere coincidence. It is well known that the *rūpas* on the punch-marked coins are very numerous, and out of them I have selected only thirty-six that show a remarkable similarity to Indus Valley pictograms.

Here is the " fish-sign ", our Fig. 9, found in three different varieties among the punch-marks, and in a number of similar " diacritic " varieties in the Indus script (Nos. 331, 341 of the Sign Manual [1]). Fig. 10 shows a collection of the " man-sign " ; it will be seen that both in the punched coins and at Mohenjo-daro distinction is made among men with arms hanging down or raised, a man carrying an object, and a row of men holding each other's hands (No. 371 ; cp. also seal with six men, pl. cxvi, 1 or cxviii, 7). It seems to me that all these little details must strike everyone as something more than accidental agreement.

The arrow sign (Fig. 11) has its counterpart in Indus sign No. 324 ; that an arrow is meant with this pictogram is evident from sign No. 378, which I have added for ready reference. The mountain symbol is well known in punch-marks and has given rise to explanations which I am unable to accept ; the Mohenjo-daro sign No. 157 (copied from seal 495, pl. cxiv) is as near an equivalent as possible. Our Fig. 13

[1] I am quoting from *Mohenjo-daro*, vol. iii ; the Sign Manual No. is given in all my illustrations. Sometimes I give the pictogram as shown on a seal, not as copied in the Manual.

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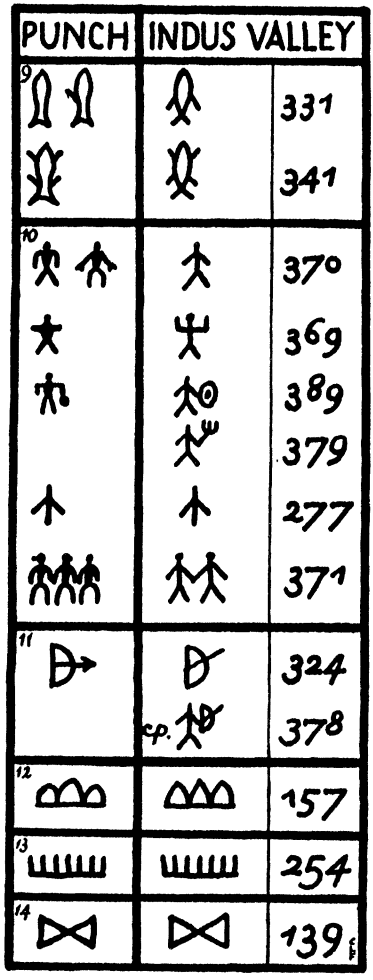
shows the perfectly identical "comb-signs"; they have seven "teeth" both in the Indus script and in the punch-mark. Fig. 14 is a very frequent symbol and could be termed the



"thunderbolt" or "axe" sign. (For this explanation see Contenau, *Manuel*, vol. i, figs. 144 and 145, and compare with these Theobald's fig. 166.) The whole illustration, Figs.

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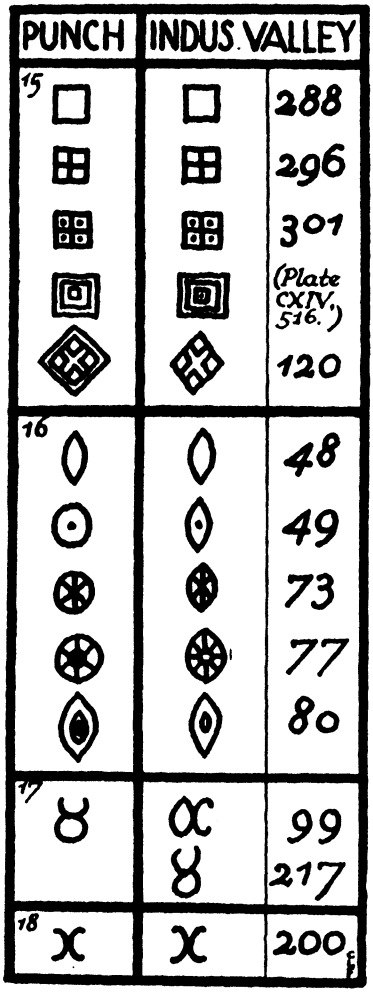
9 to 14, presents a remarkable collection of similarities that would be difficult to explain as separate invention.

Fig. 15 shows five different square punch signs with their



pictographic equivalents, and Fig. 16 five round signs, which all agree entirely in such minor details as the dots in the four compartments (No. 301), or the number of spokes in

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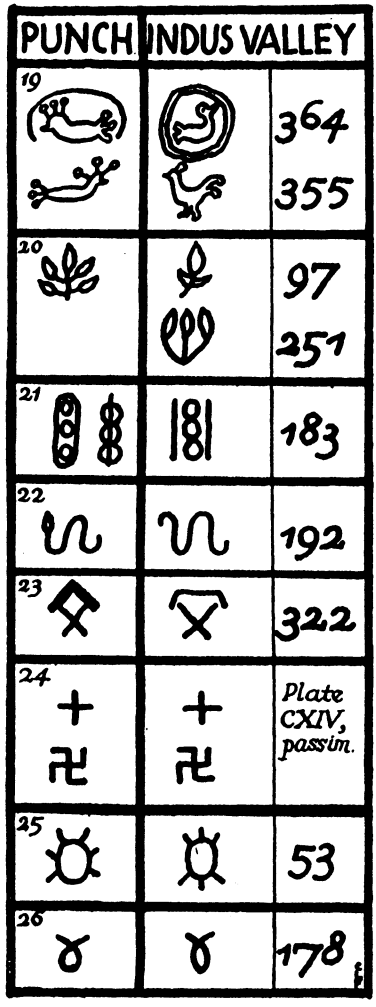
Nos. 73 and 77. I do not see how such differences can be explained by any other surmise but that they are " diacritic " marks, or different pictograms ; the squares certainly are



neither Lunar nor Solar symbols. Then follows the so-called " Taurine " symbol (or is it a Moon and a Sun together ?), the equivalent of which is probably No. 99 or 217 in the Indus

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script. Our Fig. 18 shows again two perfectly identical pictograms, the Mohenjo-daro sign being No. 200 of the Manual.

Birds are among the symbols shown upon punch-marked coins, either in a semicircle or as flying above a mountain (Fig. 19); there are quite a number of signs in the Indus script representing birds, and we reproduce here only two, viz., Nos. 364 and 355 of the List. Plants are figured rather similarly in Fig. 20; a "staff" of three circles united in the middle or on the sides is a peculiar sign shown in Fig. 21. The snake is a symbol both on the coins and in the Indus script (No. 192). Figs, 23–4 show crosses of different description; but 23 will seem to be more convincing than the far-spread and common symbols of the cross and the *svastikā*. However, Nos. 25–6 show again two such peculiar signs that their invention cannot easily be ascribed to mere coincidence. It will be seen that they have perfect equivalents in the Indus script in Nos. 53 and 178.

But certainly the most convincing one in this whole mass of evidence is the sign shown in Fig. 27. The three signs in the left half of the drawing are *one single punch-mark*, and shown in Theobald's plates as fig. 55. Their equivalents in the Indus script are shown in the right-hand compartment. It is obvious that none of the rather simple explanations offered for punch-marks by my predecessors can give a satisfactory interpretation to such a *rūpa*. The fact is that we have here to do with a regular pictographic inscription, the significance of which must have been evident to all merchants, shroffs, and moneylenders. I must mention that sign 317 has a number of variations: ; and the one shown occurs on seal 329, pl. cxi.

There is another point worth mentioning. The seals, after all, were also a kind of instrument by means of which an impression was made. The same is the case with the punching tool by means of which these punch-marks were made on

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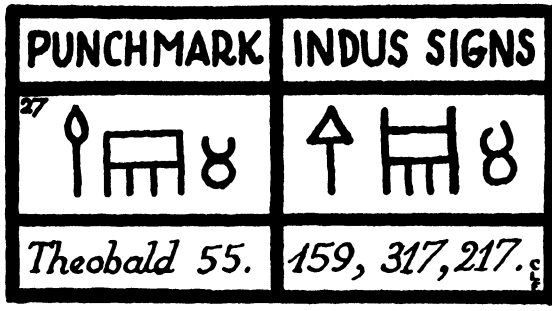
the metal. Moreover, a number of *copper* tablets have been found at Mohenjo-daro with signs similar to those of the seals; consequently, the same material has been used there already as in later times for the punch-marked coins. The question arises anew, whether the seals or sealings of the Indus Valley were intended to represent money, or, anyhow, some forerunner of currency, replacing barter. To this question, however, I feel unable to give a reply. But I must say that it does not seem impossible to me that these sealings were a sort of I.O.U. One cannot exclude this possibility, especially if we consider that a large number of early Mesopotamian documents were of a commercial character.



All these problems can only be solved when the Indus Valley script is deciphered. Our present paper does not bring this problem any nearer to its solution. Nor is it intended to do so. It is intended to draw attention afresh to the early coinage of India as a survival of prehistoric Indian civilization.

There remains only one point to be dealt with. It is the question whether one can suppose that these signs could have survived 2,000 years or more. The answer is in the most emphatical affirmative. A large number of signs of Mesopotamia have remained practically unchanged for 2,500 years; here is our own capital alphabet, practically the same as was 2,000 years ago that of the Romans; the symbols of the Zodiac are unaltered since 4,000 years; and there is

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Chinese writing, although slightly changed, still surviving after 3,000 years. The life of symbols, once accepted, is almost unlimited. The sand-glass, although used only as an egg-boiler now, is still the symbol of Time as it was in Athens 2,500 years ago ; the Cross still has a sacred meaning for us ; a sword is a symbol of War, and a palm-branch that of Peace ; even an illiterate person will understand that a heart means Love and an anchor Hope, although this symbolism would not be quite as evident in another civilization.

And who knows, how old some of the punch-marked coins may be ? In 327 B.C. Alexander the Great was already presented at Taxila with 80 Talents of this silver coinage. Cunningham says : "They were certainly current in the time of Buddha, that is, in the sixth century B.C. But I see no difficulty in thinking that they might mount as high as 1,000 B.C. They certainly belong to the very infancy of coinage." [1]

We should like to add now that, in our opinion, they preserve a number of pictograms and symbols of the prehistoric period that preceded the Āryan invasion.[2]

January, 1934.

REFERENCE KEY TO THE ILLUSTRATIONS

(C. = Cunningham ; T. = Theobald ; W. = Walsh ; *M.* = *Mohenjo-daro*, vol. iii.)

FIG.

1. T., 30 ; *M.*, pl. cxvi, 20.
2. W., xix, 7 ; *M.*, pl. cx, 320.
3. W., xix, 8-9 ; *M.*, pl. cxi, 336.
4. C., i, 26 and T., 221 ; *M.*, pl. cx, 302.
5. W., xviii, 5 ; *M.*, pl. cxii, 369.
6. T., 223 ; *M.*, pl. cxi, 353, 355.

[1] Op. laud., p. 43.

[2] Sir Richard Burn kindly draws my attention to the fact that some of the symbols in the present article persist even on Muhammadan coins down to the eighteenth century. This is another good proof in favour of my thesis that symbols have a very long life. If these symbols have been in use in historical times since about 600 B.C. up to A.D. 1800, then there is no reason to doubt that they could have lived two thousand years earlier already.

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FIG.

7. W., xix, 25; *M.*, pl. cix, 245.
8. T., 19, 21, 23, 26; *M.*, pl. cxvii, 5-6.

In the following figs. the Mohenjo-daro sign is always noted.

9. T., 62, 42, 43, 44, etc.
10. W., xix, 53, 51, 52; T., 4; W., xix, 81, 54.
11. W., xviii, 47; T., 56, 57, 58.
12. W., xix, 3c.; T., 59.
13. W., xviii, 43.
14. T., 48, 102, 166; somewhat different: W., xix, 69.
15. T., 168; W., xviii, 53, 52, xix, 73; T., 111, 162.
16. T., 152; W., xviii, 44, xix, 88, xviii, 15, 40, 55; T., 198.
17. T., 128 and *passim*.
18. T., 218.
19. W., xix, 68, 66.
20. T., 82, also 64-9.
21. T., 226, 133, 136.
22. T., 31, 32, 34; better examples in C., ii, 21, 22, without head.
23. T., 190.
24. *Passim*, e.g. T., 134.
25. T., 159.
26. T., 231.
27. T., 55.

197.

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